

JOHN BOLTON AND THE IC'S NEW SOURCING RULES

John Bolton—and crazy nutters like him—are complaining that the NIE must be wrong because it was written by people who used to be at State.

Well, I think it's potentially wrong, but I would also say, many of the people who wrote this are former State Dept employees who during their career at the State Dept never gave much attention to the threat of the Iranian program. Now they are writing as (fingers quote) 'members of the intelligence community' the same opinions that they've had four and five years ago.

Bolton's talking about Thomas Fingar, who held one of the top two positions at INR through the period when Bolton was fighting with INR at State. And he's talking about Christian Westermann, whom Bolton tried to have fired because Westermann wouldn't approve a Bolton speech on Cuba that made completely undocumented claims.

That in and of itself should warn you that Bolton is rehashing old State Department fights. But when you look at the nature of Bolton's previous dispute with Westermann, it gets more interesting.

Part of Bolton's (and his deputy Fred Fleitz's) complaint with Westermann is that Westermann insisted on sourcing the claims about Cuba Bolton wanted to make for the officers who would declassify it. Westermann describes doing so to be helpful.

Because I attached that memo. And then I just said that, would you please put this through the process. And there is a

suspense that is contained in the memo, and then I provided some additional references for the paragraph, serial numbers and things like that to assist them in sorting out what Fred said was the source documentation for the paragraph. And then I wrote INR does not concur with the suggested language and I wrote INR suggests an alternative paragraph, and then I wrote what I thought might work. [my emphasis]

Yet Fleitz depicts this as a serious breach of protocol.

FREDERICK FLEITZ: Westerman had asked some unreasonable requests for the language that I had asked, especially when he had asked for the source documents behind published IC publications, that was an extraordinarily unreasonable thing to ask, so I was suspicious about what would happen when he sent the language to the Agency. [my emphasis]

..Because god forbid an analyst actually know the substance and quality of a claim when he's assessing it.

Well, as it has it, new rules on sourcing are one of the things that contributed to the new conclusions in the NIE.

Drawing lessons from the intelligence debacle over supposed Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell required agencies to consult more sources and to say to a larger intelligence community audience precisely what they know and how they know it – and to acknowledge, to a degree previously unheard of, what they do not know. [my emphasis]

Just one reminder about the Iraq NIE, to

illustrate why this is important: One of the four Iraqi defectors who contributed to the NIE's claims on mobile bioweapons labs had been discredited as a fabricator in May 2002, five months before his story was used in the NIE. But apparently, they sourced their material to him—speaking as an anonymous source—for a Vanity Fair article! Had Tenet required analysts working on that NIE to cite their sources, such a colossal error might have been avoided ("Once I found out this guy had been discredited as a fake, I used a popular, anonymously sourced, news article instead so I could still use the claim" probably wouldn't cut it.)

Secrecy News has a copy of what I assume are these new sourcing guidelines. If you're a research wonk at all, they're worth reading at some length for their sheer common sense. Things like:

2. Source reference citations shall be included as endnotes in disseminated analytic products. These endnotes shall be provided for all significant, substantive reporting or other information upon which the product's analytic judgments, assessments, estimates, alternative hypotheses and views, or confidence levels depend. ... When the information cited might be dynamic or temporary (e.g., data base, file name, or Uniform Resource Locator (URL)), the originator shall record and retain a copy of the relevant data in an official record keeping system as a document of record, preferably in digital form.

[snip]

4. Analytic assessments or other finished intelligence should not be cited as evidence for assertions of facts or as the sole or principal basis for analytic judgments, unless the original, underlying reporting is inaccessible.

You know—the same thing I used to teach 18-year olds in Freshman Comp: show your work and rely on primary sources.

John Bolton and his crowd have a history of taking "facts" from the ether and using those "facts" to start wars. I can well imagine that he's pissed those State Department analysts (who, of course, were the only ones right on Iraq) are screwing up his campaign on Iran by actually checking his "facts."